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## INTERNATIONAL

# Brezhnev: The Final Days

For months the approaching end has been written in his face: the drawn expression, the distant gaze, the eyes empty of the strength that has animated and driven the Soviet Union for the past eighteen years. Now it seems all but certain that the political career of Leonid Brezhnev is entering its final days. Moscow churned last week with rumors that Brezhnev was lying ill at home or in a hospital. The swirl of gossip and sightings ran to a mysterious plane flight from Tashkent, a canceled diplomatic visit and some rough jockeying in the Politburo. Beyond that, there was an unsettling silence—and no other sign of The Leader.

As was true in the twilight years of Joseph Stalin and Chairman Mao, the true state of Brezhnev's health was one of the world's best kept secrets. But NEWSWEEK has learned that a ten-page U.S. intelligence document reports that Brezhnev suffered a "very serious" stroke in Tashkent two weeks ago and is now in a Moscow hospital. The report concludes that even if Brezhnev survives his ordeal, he will be unable to hold on to power for long as General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party and President of the Soviet Union. The need to prepare for Brezhnev's succession, the report says, prompted party leaders to postpone a Central Committee meeting scheduled for last week until late May. The report also predicts that Brezhnev will resign his posts at the May meeting. There are already numerous signs that a shadowy battle for the succession has begun among a group of Politburo members who are still largely unknown in the West (page 33). "They are going to use the Central Committee to make the succession look like a democratic choice," said one U.S. official.

Other sources were a good deal more guarded. They said doctors were still not sure whether Brezhnev had actually suffered a mild stroke or a transient prestroke condition called "spasms of the cerebral vessels." They were hoping that the second, less serious, diagnosis was correct. If so, Brezhnev could reappear within a few weeks. "It is not a matter of life or death yet," said one Soviet insider, who suggested Brezhnev may be under treatment at his well-equipped sickroom at home rather than in the hospital.

**'Desperate Situation':** Even if Brezhnev does struggle back, it is hard to see how he can effectively run the Soviet Union for long. His decline leaves the country facing a disturbing period of instability. Brezhnev does not have a natural successor in waiting. The Soviets are overextended in Afghanistan and Poland and in lesser adventures in the troubled Third World. Compounding those uncertainties, a growing economic crisis now tugs at the Soviet Union and most of its Eastern European satellites. "They're in a more desperate situation than I had assumed," observed Ronald Reagan in his press conference last week. For a time a succession crisis could force Soviet leaders to focus their energies and attentions on the home front. But there were also worries that a Soviet Union weakened or off balance could well turn more aggressive.

The rumors of Brezhnev's collapse began two weeks ago after the Soviet leader made a taxing four-day visit to Tashkent in Uzbekistan. When Soviet television and newspapers failed to carry the customary photographs of Brezhnev's return to Mos-

*With his health  
faltering and his  
career drawing to an  
end, the Kremlin's  
power struggle begins.*

cow, word spread quickly that he had been hospitalized. Suspicions deepened when a scheduled visit to the Kremlin by South Yemen's President Ali Nasir Muhammad was abruptly canceled. According to one report, Brezhnev had suffered a stroke at the airport in Tashkent; his aides had to lift him on to the plane and later carried him on a stretcher to a Moscow hospital. The unconfirmed report also said that Brezhnev's family had gathered around his hospital bed and that the atmosphere was "like a wake."

Predictably, Soviet officials refused to comment on the reports. But Brezhnev's personal physician, Yevgeny Chazov, canceled a scheduled trip to England. On the

night Brezhnev returned from Tashkent, two black ZIL limousines pulled up to a special hospital on Granovsky Street near the Kremlin, where Politburo members frequently go for treatment. (ZIL's are the official vehicles of Politburo members, and Brezhnev's is the only motorcade that includes two ZIL's.) Normally, traffic signs discreetly steer unauthorized cars away from Granovsky Street where some senior Moscow officials live, while a policeman patrols the corner. Last week a metal barrier blocked off the street. "Dangerous Zone," warned a sign—although there was no hazardous construction work in sight.

By all accounts, Brezhnev's health has been declining for years. There have been repeated unconfirmed reports that he receives injections for a nerve affliction in his jaw, requires blood transfusions for a mild form of leukemia and wears a pacemaker. He is also reported to have taken regular medication for a heart condition and has apparently had several heart spasms—the latest in February. At a trade-union congress shortly after the latest attack, Brezhnev repeatedly halted working sessions for unscheduled breaks—apparently so he could rest and get medical help. He was also reportedly looking frail and distracted when he met a Finnish delegation at the Kremlin last month. During a 90-minute talk with Finnish President Mauno Koivisto, Brezhnev was able to focus on the discussion only for the first half hour.

**Hearing Aid:** In recent months signs of Brezhnev's deterioration have also shown up with startling frequency in public. When a group of Soviet leaders went to the Moscow Art Theater last month to see "Thus We Shall Triumph," a play about Lenin's twilight years, Brezhnev had problems with his hearing aid. Like many people with hearing problems, he reacted by speaking in an ab-

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